Oct 24 2005

ON Oct 18th of 2005, as I was laying on the couch, my other half, Val, read to me and article in the newspaper that said a B-17 had flown into Gainesville Airport, and would be there through Wednesday. “2 days?, and in the middle of the week?”, I thought to myself. It hardly seemed fitting to have a wonderful piece of history like a B-17G Flying Fortress grace our town, and only be available to the public on 2 weekdays, and almost exclusively during working hours! Quite an outrage really.

Naturally I cancelled almost all my plans for Wednesday, as did Val, cleared my two digital cameras of memory, and off we went to pay the old war-bird a visit. I was getting a bit nervous a we drove to where I thought it would be parked, because I couldn‘t see it! A bomber? I should be pretty big! As we arrived at the proper place, almost on top of it, I saw the yellow tail first. This was the third B-17 I went to visit, and yet I had forgotten how small they are compared to modern aircraft! $10.00 for he 2 of us? Fair Enough!

Off I went taking pictures, as Val walked around the old Fortress in wonder. As I was working away around the to the back, I saw Val and a group of people clustered around the Tail Guns. They all seemed to be listening to someone, an elderly gentleman of small stature, was standing in the center talking. His speech mannerisms were so quiet I couldn’t even hear him till I was almost 6 feet away. The senior gentleman, was a Tail Gunner in World War-2 on a B-17G, and was describing what it was like to be in the tail guns, on real missions! Unfortunately, when I got there, he had just finished talking “RATS!”. He then slowly resumed walking around the plane, albeit a bit unsteadily, using a cane for support.

Walking back around to the nose where a ladder had been set up to enter the aircraft, Val and I promptly did so. Immediately I began taking pictures of everything! We even got in a couple of pictures of each us playing Waist gunners, on the Browning (de-milled) .50 caliber machine guns set up in the aircraft. A few more pictures later, and Val was ready to exit. It was a very warm day outside, and the inside of the old bomber had to be approaching triple Fahrenheit digits! “I’m going back up front for another photo of the bombardiers position; meet you outside.” I mumbled.

Getting up front, I nearly had to hang upside down from the flight deck to get my picture, as the position was closed off behind Plexiglas! Straightening up I was asked to take a picture of a gentleman before the cockpit. As I was taking the picture, the Elderly tail gunner was standing there as well. I took the picture for the gentleman, and then stayed to look a bit, and listened, as the old warrior of the skies was speaking about the inside of the aircraft. He was commenting about how the silver insulation on the bulkheads was all “new”, none of that in his day! How this area was closed off, and the crew had to step over this, and that. I followed after him through the bomb-bay, noting that even at his age, and with a cane, he was managing his way through the old B-17 much better than I was! It was interesting when he commented, that when he walked through the bomb-bay across the catwalk, during the war, it looked different with actual bombs there, and of course the doors were closed! (the doors on this bomber were opened for display) I followed he gentleman and his daughter back, listening to her ask questions, and his comments on various duty stations and artifacts; “this was the radio operators area. LOOK! They actually have the original telegraph key would have used to send messages!” He commented several time on how the restoration of the old bomber looked. He talked about what the people in each position did, noting the radio man never or seldom ever operated a machine gun, as he was always too busy sending messages!

We walked back to the waist section, and I listened to him talk about how he crawled back to the tail guns, and that it was more open than this bomber was, as there wasn’t a bench in the way. He also noted someone had left a bag with a camera in it! “MINE!” I cheerfully spoke up. There were a few others there as well, and we all sat down on the Bench seats, that were newly put in for tourist flights, and I listened to him talk about things like, we couldn’t see the ball turret form inside because the plywood floor they had installed covered all that, and it was a bit higher than the real floor actually was. He made comments on other things like that, and then a political discussion ensued about the government not wanting to people to own aircraft of this type anymore; and other things.

Finally it got too hot, and we all exited the aircraft. The gentleman war Veteran, still had more tales, and his eyes wee completely alight as he told us about how the crew all wanted to try out the Ball Turret position. He commented that after you climbed in, it was a matter of reaching up behind you to flip two latches to seal the turret door, which had to be pressed down by an crewmember from outside, in order to shut it! One member of the crew, climbed in, but after several attempts by another member, using his foot to shut the turret door, it just wouldn’t close. The member of the crew, attempting to seal the turret, then pooped out, all cramped up, and made the comment that enough was enough; he just wasn’t going to fit in that thing! You had to be a rather small person to get in there.

All kinds of questions began to be asked of the gentleman. Did you have an escape hatch? Yes. Was there a lot of room? Yes but I kept my flight bag back there. Was there a way or method to 'relieve' yourself? Yes there was a tube. Several more questions were asked, and then someone finally asked if he had shot at an enemy aircraft. What followed, was a fascinating anecdote, about how an ME-262 German Jet fighter attacked, and he was nervous about the 30mm shells that plane used. Being nervous, as the enemy 262 flew into range, our tail gunner opened up, and was sure he put a few hits into him! Somebody, or somebody's got the enemy plane, because as it flew up to the front of squadron. It suddenly just blew up! Asked; "Who got the credit?". "The whole squadron got the credit. Because 'everybody. Was shooting at it!", he said.

His daughter then began to show a real silk escape map, that he had kept, though not supposed to, all through the years. I had never seen one before, so that was a real treat. Both of them then showed some of his medals he had earned during the war. "what are all those stars on the ribbons for?" someone asked.
"One for each bombing mission we completed"
"didn't you do 25 missions/"
"yes"
"How come there aren't that many stars?"
" I got tired of putting the damn things on!" our story telling Tail Gunner exclaimed.
We all had a chuckle at that.
The old vet's daughter then showed us all a portion of the manuscript form the memoirs the gentleman was writing, there were many pictures, and we all got to see our historic flier as he looked, all those years ago during the war, young at 25 years of age, but yet one of the oldest members in his Bomber Group. It was now easy to see him gliding through the old steel gal even better than he was now, doing his duty as a Tail-gunner, for the war! Amazing. He discussed some of the photos, and memories about who was what, etc.

Eventually they departed company, and I shook both the old Tail Gunner's and Daughter's hands and wished them true blessings from God, and thanked him for all they did, back when even my parents were in their early single digit years, and then they departed. Embarrassingly I have forgotten the gentleman's name, although I have several pictures of him. I hope one day to get a chance to thoroughly read those memoirs!

One Wednesday, one old B-17, and one old Tail Gunner. Like those credit card commercials quip: Cost of fuel, about $6.00. Entry ticket, $10.00. Photos, meeting the veteran tail gunner, stories , anecdotes, history lessons, and pictures taken; absolutely priceless!

God Bless all the soldiers, and veterans of every Nation, and every War.

EricTruax